



UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

Wednesday November 26, 2014

Dear Students,

The Graduate Teaching Fellows union (GTFF) has declared its intention to go out on strike next week, on Tuesday December 2. I'm writing to you now to explain how this will affect History 201. The GTFF and the UO administration's labor representatives have been in negotiations since last November (2013) and have hit an impasse. The GTFF has made a number of reasonable demands, which the administration seems unwilling to grant. As a result the GTFs have chosen to use the only real leverage they possess—to withhold their labor. Strikes are disruptive—that's their point. We notice the critical contribution that the strikers—our GTFs—make to our educational lives, and we hope that the administration quickly realizes that as well and settles their conflict with the GTFF. It's impossible to predict, however, how long the strike will continue.

Some will blame the GTFF for this disruption in undergraduate teaching, but the administration bears considerable blame for its unwillingness to compromise. They have likely spent more in their prolonged negotiations with the GTFF than it would have cost to fund the GTFF's requested two-week sick leave policy. And it will cost much more to hire replacement workers to circumvent the strike. My personal opinion is that this approach is ill advised, counterproductive, irresponsible, and needlessly expensive. Though the central administration represents itself as "the university," in fact the heart of the university is its students (undergraduate and graduate), faculty, and staff—most of whom have not had any say in the negotiations, even though we have the most at stake.

The administration seems willing to compromise the academic integrity of the university in the interest of "continuity." I am not. It has recommended a number of "options" to work around the strike, including hiring others to grade your work, even suggesting advanced undergraduates, cancelling exams and other assignments, transforming exams into multiple choice tests, or simply grading students on the work already performed. In History 201 this would entail abandoning the syllabus (my contract with you), and awarding final grades based on some 55 percent of the graded work completed so far. Because this course is designed to reach a large number of students—over 100—and because my other responsibilities already demand 100 percent of my time, I am not able to grade your work myself. But, on professional and moral grounds, I would not do so in any case. Your GTFs have done a terrific job, worked with you closely, and know you and are in a position to judiciously evaluate your performance. Under present circumstances I cannot do as well—as well as you deserve. Nor will I undermine their efforts to get a just contract. I will not work as a strikebreaker or "scab."

Where does that leave us in History 201? The exam you took last Tuesday, November 25 (20 percent of your grade) is not yet graded, but it should be evaluated, and your grade on it should be counted in the calculation of your final grade. As should your final exam. Next week, during the strike, I will deliver my final two lectures in the course as scheduled. The

discussion section meetings taught normally by GTFs, scheduled for week 10, will be cancelled. The final exam (25 percent of your grade) will occur as scheduled on Tuesday, December 9 at 8:00 a.m. I will proctor the exam myself and collect your examination books, but the exams will remain ungraded until the strike is settled and the GTFs are able to grade them. Thus, if the strike extends into finals week or beyond, you will not receive a grade in History 201. Under these circumstances, with so much of your work ungraded, I am unable to file any grades ethically, responsibly, or fairly.

It's possible that a representative of the administration might decide that filing grades—even indiscriminate ones—is more important than insuring the integrity and justness of such grades. Communications from the administration have suggested that in some cases it might usurp the role of “instructor of record” and file grades themselves. Such a move would be arbitrary and capricious, and a fundamental violation of academic freedom, but it could occur nonetheless. I certainly hope that this does not happen, and that the strike is quickly settled, that the administration treats you equitably and with the respect you merit, and that this mishandling of negotiations with the GTFFs doesn't damage the integrity and reputation of the University of Oregon we have worked so hard to sustain.

You may be concerned about how all this will affect your academic progress or financial aid. I am empathetic. These are important administrative matters, requiring administrative fixes in these extraordinary circumstances. I encourage you to contact the administration, which should be able to find workable administrative solutions that do not compromise the academic integrity of the university. It's their responsibility—and it's in their interest as well as yours—to ensure your ongoing eligibility for financial aid.

I will see you all next week and answer any questions you have then. I hope in the meantime that you have a nice Thanksgiving holiday and that somehow the strike is averted.

best wishes,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Matthew Dennis".

Matthew Dennis,
Professor of History and Environmental Studies
History 201